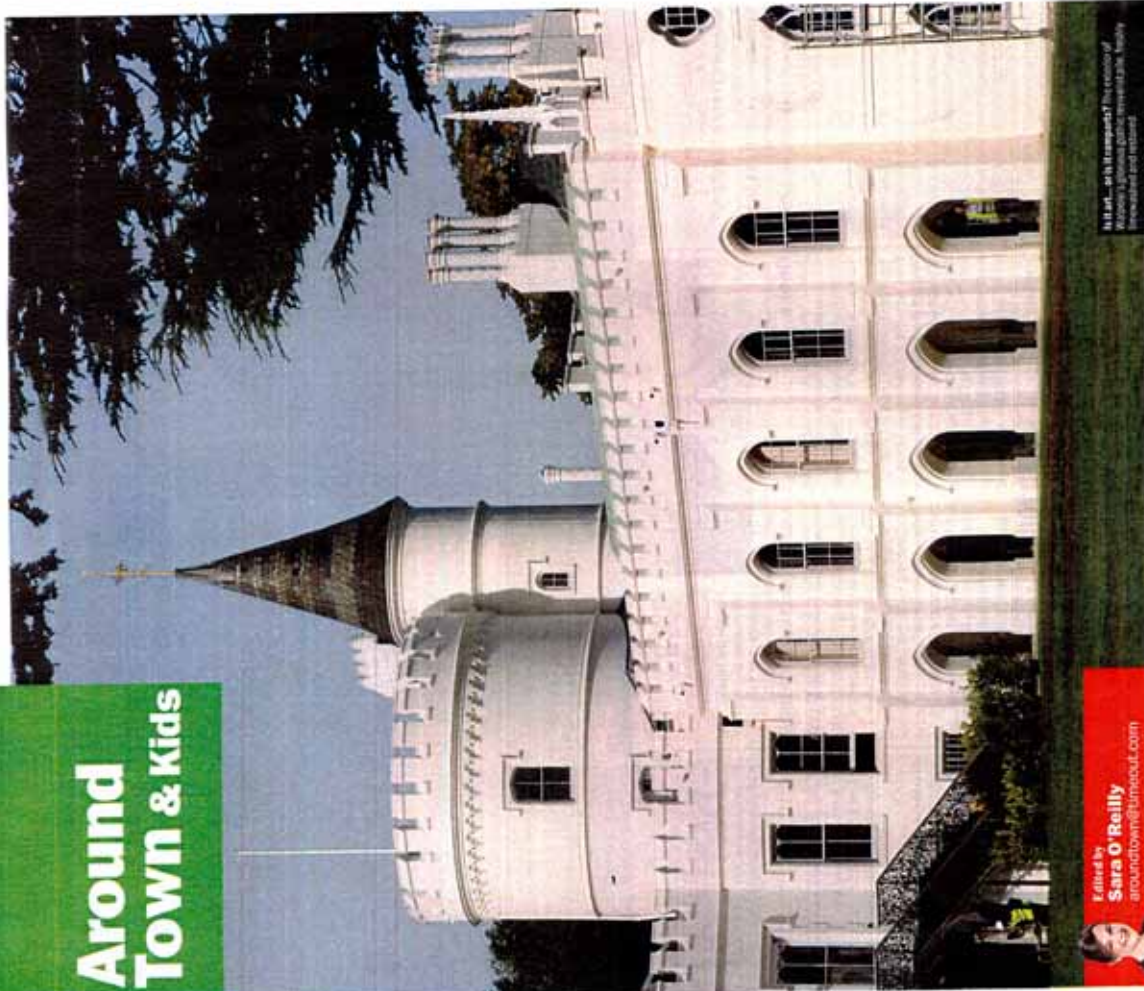


## Around Town & Kids



Edited by  
**Sara O'Reilly**  
aroundtown@timeout.com

### Why you should visit Strawberry Hill

After a £9 million restoration, one of London's best loved houses reopens. Words **Natasha Polyviou**. Photography **Lisa Payne**

Novelist and collector Horace Walpole, the creator of Strawberry Hill House, couldn't have been more wrong about the fate of his pet project when he pronounced that, "My buildings are paper like my writings; both will be blown away in ten years after I am dead." In fact, so completely did he convert the "bauble of a small house" into his "little gothic castle" that it became a wildly successful tourist attraction in his

own lifetime, when everyone from the royal family downwards passed through its singular doors, and it went on to be acknowledged as one of the most significant examples of the gothic revival style. It reopened this week following a £9 million restoration, bringing back into spotlight the captivating tale of its history as a locus for glamorous gatherings of the great and the good; the scattering around the world by a

latter owner of its remarkable contents in a scandalous fit of pique, and successive episodes of restoration and lapses into disrepair. The present works, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the World Monuments Fund and other donors, were still taking place as we went to press. This is phase one, in which the fabric of the house including intricately crafted chambers, highly detailed stained glass, gilded network and the dazzling limewashed exterior have been restored or recreated by conservation architects Inskip and Jenkins. Subsequent phases will see furniture and paintings added and the garden remodelled.

In the mid-eighteenth century, when Walpole embarked on his gothic revival project, it was the custom among people of privilege to take refuge from central London's unbearable summer heat in country retreats on the Thames. Horace Walpole, son of Britain's first prime minister, managed to snap up one of the last remaining properties in fashionable Twickenham, where the neighbours included such luminaries as the poet Alexander Pope. A keen

**“I trust that my guests will forgive a little artifice in the service of wonder”**

historian and art collector, the new owner of Strawberry Hill set out to transform the villa into a fantasy castle. Built in a style now familiar from grand edifices such as St Pancras Station and the Houses of Parliament, both of which it is said to have inspired, Strawberry Hill was a unique spectacle in its time, a blinding white, wedding-cake-like confection that stood out among the classically proportioned buildings of the area. Walpole gathered a team that included architects Robert Adam and John Chute, who had a grand old time visiting ancient buildings and plundering them for ideas to transpose to Strawberry Hill. Irregular features were deliberately chosen to convey a sense of the unexpected and uncanny, yet a devotion to creating faithful reproductions was superseded by a desire for drama: "I trust that my guests will forgive a little artifice in the service of wonder," Walpole comments theatrically in the re-enacted audio tour of the house.

And what a reception the guests could expect – on one occasion an actress friend of Walpole's disappeared into the loft and made her entrance on a contraption that framed her as a goddess descending from the heavens. Walpole was a voracious collector of antiquities and curiosities, and pioneered the presentation of the thousands of objects he amassed in a chronological journey through history style familiar to us from museums

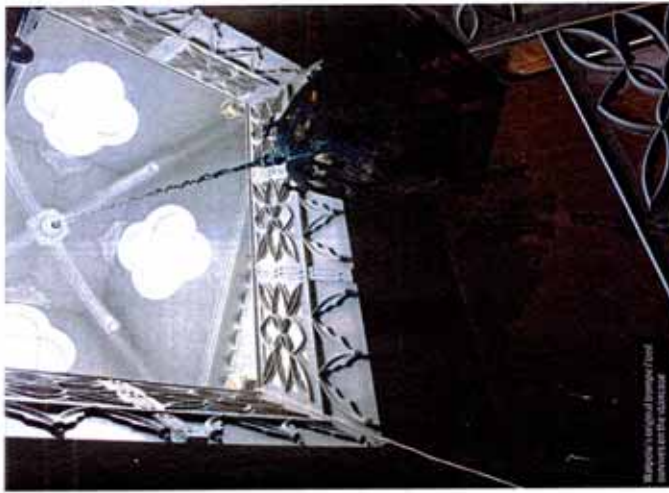
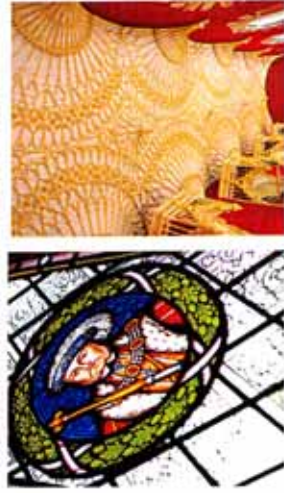


Illustration by **James Galloway** for **Time Out**



walls so as not to obstruct the view of the grounds (Walpole considered the view to be part of the decor), ornate paper-maché and gilded ceilings, and the Tribune, Walpole's cabinet of curiosities, based on the Uffizi's treasure gallery which boasts heart-shaped wall carvings and a starburst roof, all contained within a fairy-tale-like exterior.

**Strawberry Hill House**, 208 Twickenham Rd, Twickenham, TW1 4ST (87.44 31.24; [www.strawberryhillhouse.org.uk](http://www.strawberryhillhouse.org.uk)). Strawberry Hill rail. **Oct 2-Dec 22 2010**. Apr 2-Nov 2 2011. Noon-4. 20pm Mon-Wed; Sat. Sun. entry by timed ticket, admitting up to 20 people every 20 mins. Booking advised. [www.timeout.com/aroundtown](http://www.timeout.com/aroundtown)



**Who was Horace Walpole?** Born into privilege in 1717 and bestowed with a political position thanks to his father, Robert, Horace Walpole could certainly not be accused of resting on his well-connected laurels. As well as being a great collector of historical artefacts, an interest he began to indulge during his customary grand tour, Walpole also actively supported artists of his own time, particularly women. It was his intention that Strawberry Hill become a creative and social retreat, a tradition which reached its apotheosis during the golden years of Frances Waldegrave who inherited it and famously made it the social hub of the Liberal Party in the 1850s and '60s. The atmosphere of Strawberry Hill, particularly the amnicity painted a monastic earthy grey, inspired its owner to write what many consider to be the first gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. In another renovation, it was published on the country's first private printing press, which Walpole established at Strawberry Hill. He was also a prolific letter writer, providing some 3,000 documents which give us an invaluable picture of his time. An active antiquarian, Walpole was one of the first trustees of the British Museum and one of the most significant collectors of the eighteenth century in his own right, acquiring Ancient Greek ceramics, Sevres porcelain, Bohemian miniatures and curios such as James I's gloves, all of which he meticulously catalogued. After the famous sale when his possessions were dispersed far and wide, early twentieth-century American collector William Lewis took it upon himself to gather as much Walpoliana as he could find, which he later bequeathed to The Yale Center for British Art. The collection now resides in Yale University's Lewis Walpole Library.

**HORACE WALPOLE 1717-1797**  
"A MAN OF LETTERS LIVED HERE"